



Paradise found

Forget the Caribbean. For an idyllic island home in the ultimate wow-factor setting, the Seychelles is the place to go, says a smitten ARABELLA YOUENS

ONE of the most surprising aspects of the Seychelles has nothing to do with its natural charms, which are immense, but is a by-product of politics. Since a coup d'état following independence in 1977, the islands spent 27 years under a quasi-Marxist government that discouraged mass tourism and commercialism, thereby shrouding them in a bubble-wrapped time warp. Drive around the main island of Mahé today and you'll struggle to spot any advertising billboards, almost certainly pass the 'main crossroads' of the capital, Victoria, without realising and have to take care not to swerve onto a beach when roads seem to run out of Tarmac. Slow down. No one's in a hurry: the Seychellois enjoy nearly 100% employment and the highest income per head in Africa; the prevailing contentment is contagious.

Prior to independence, the islands attracted fame as the ultimate far-flung destination for those with a sense of adventure and a large wallet. When the airport first opened in 1971, a flight from Europe would have involved a trek down east Africa made up

of five stops. But that didn't put off Peter Sellers and George Harrison from buying a 700-acre estate on Mahé (which they later lost when the land was nationalised). Four decades on, refreshingly little has changed. But although all this provides ample fodder for an authentically shabby-chic lifestyle, it couldn't be further from that of the Côte d'Azur. Supermarket shortages are not unheard of, designer shops are non-existent, and there's only one cinema. The nightlife is little more than a few bars and discos held in converted grain stores.

At first glance, the practicalities of owning a home in the Seychelles don't stack up. The islands are en route to nowhere, completely isolated (1,000 miles off the coast of Kenya) and involve an overnight flight from London. But, as the axis of the world's economic powerhouses swivels eastwards, it's worth noting that the islands are considerably easier to reach for anyone based in the Middle or Far East. Furthermore, distance isn't always an obstacle, according to a recent Knight Frank survey—there's a tier of high-net-worth buyers who

are willing to travel 10 hours to their holiday home, and they might visit less but tend to stay longer. The local government is aware of this strategic advantage and last year revised its tough regulations on property ownership in a bid to attract foreign investment.

But rest assured, the Seychellois government's approach is high end and low environmental impact. Nearly 50% of the land is protected, and projects undergo thorough vetting. Weekly checks are made, and work can be suspended if developers abuse the laws. 'They know the islands are their most precious asset and can't afford to let anyone destroy the natural beauty,' explains Philip d'Abo, of the new Four Seasons Residences on Mahé.

The 26 Four Seasons villas certainly take advantage of this natural beauty. Plotted on a steep hillside of palm, bamboo and takamaka trees, some overlook the half-moon-shaped, white-sand Petite Anse Bay beach and others look out towards the breaking reef and the Indian ocean beyond.

(Above) One of the Four Seasons villas. (Facing page) The islands' natural beauty





\$7m

The Four Seasons villas on Mahé look out on Petite Anse Bay or the Indian Ocean, and have Creole-inspired architecture. \$7m–\$12m freehold (020–7758 8488)

The villas are vast stilted structures, designed as pavilions set on different levels and connected by walkways, with spacious sun decks and infinity pools. Created by the award-winning architect Chong Yew Kuan, they're discreet in design, and take inspiration from the Creole vernacular with antique copper roofs and teak floors. The Hirsch Bedner interiors, Bose sound system and a Four Seasons support force ensure that an unadulterated comfort is on tap.

Unusually for the Seychelles, the villas are offered freehold. But the fact that this is a relatively new destination isn't reflected in the price tag; prices range from \$7 million to \$12 million, and, on top of that, owners pay annual management fees of between \$65,000 and \$85,000. 'But that hasn't put anyone off,' argues Mr d'Abo. 'We've already sold 18 of the villas.' Indeed, one English buyer has bought two and linked them together, making room for seven bedrooms.

'In terms of paradise islands, this is the best there is,' says James Davies, director of sales agents Hamptons International. 'Many of our buyers are hedge-fund managers based in London; they might only visit twice a year, but for privacy and scenery, it's unrivalled. The other attraction is that this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.'



\$1.5m

Banyan bliss

Cluttons are selling 60 beachfront villas in the Banyan Tree resort on the southwest coast of Mahé. The villas are airy, plantation-style houses with either one or two bedrooms and a strong emphasis on outside space. As they form part of the overall resort, owners are given 60 days use per year.

The only snag about the Banyan Tree is the beach: it's a glorious crescent of white sand, but the currents are too rough for swimming. From \$1.5 million (020–7584 3050; www.cluttonsresorts.com)

However, if the Four Seasons Residences are too low-key, buyers with equally sizeable wallets are invited to look at something very different being built on the island of Félicité. Hitherto, the island was home to exotic birds and a few rather basic A-frame huts where Tony Blair once holidayed. Today, a striking new resort is on its way.

Zil Pasyon (Creole for 'Island of Passion') is the cutting edge vision of the London-based, eco-friendly architect Richard Hywel Evans. Access is via a helicopter—which could prove a nuisance after a 10-hour flight, but the Zil team have negotiated its own WiFi-d mini 'departure lounge' just a few yards from the main airport, and the helicopter is one of few in the world with air-conditioning. And what it loses in convenience, it gains in castaway points. Just one end of this island of wild agave, mango trees and vanilla orchards is going to be tamed by the development, which, in the brochure's language, will result in 'paradise remastered'. Even the developers have stopped short of describing the 28 properties as 'villas'. Instead, these extraordinary structures, where ceilings are made of swimming pools,

**PARADISE PROPERTY EXPLAINED:
WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT
BUYING IN THE SEYCHELLES**

- Air Seychelles flies direct to Mahé twice a week from London Heathrow (10hrs). KLM, Air France and Qatar Airways also fly (with stops). Flights cost about £600 return
- Owning a property on one of the larger developments in the Seychelles usually confers residency rights for the owner and immediate family
- There is no capital gains tax or inheritance tax
- No building in the Seychelles can be higher than a coconut palm
- Locals are fluent in English and French



A slice of Mahé magic

Aylesford are selling a four-bedroom house on Mahé that was built by the South Africa-based owner in the 1990s. ‘I first came to the Seychelles in the late 1960s, when it was a convenient stopover between Johannesburg and Japan. It’s beautiful, the people are delightful and it’s perfect if you don’t take life too seriously.’ £1.6m (020-7351 2383; www.aylesford.com)

which are surgically placed on Jurassic boulders, are referred to as HQs. One could imagine Blofeld adopting a playboy persona and hiding out here in some style, surrounded by all the Bond girls.

‘We didn’t want to do another “colonial” design that you can find on any island all

over the world. Nor did we want a cartoon version of Creole,’ says architect Richard Hywel Evans. ‘The design-conscious people who are likely to be attracted to Zil are the types who collect villas like they collect art.’

‘This resort is designed to attract those who aspire to the island life, but want that certain comfort of knowing civilisation isn’t far off. Here, you’re earthed but unplugged,’ says Jenni Beggs, MD of Per Aquum residences, the hotel brand behind the resort. Although sun, sea and seclusion are the main draws, Zil houses are big-statement features. Owners will be able to indulge in a welter of à la carte services, including private dinner parties in the cave wine cellar, overlooked by the original poster of the Rolling Stones 1968 album *Beggars Banquet*. Properties are for sale on a 99-year lease and start from £1.9 million through Knight Frank and Erna Low.

An affordable way of owning a piece of paradise is buying in the Eden Island development of 470 apartments and villas. Built on reclaimed land—a move that’s sparked controversy in a nation that prides itself on its environmental approach—one-bedroom apartments with mountain and sea views start at €295,000 through Savills International (020-7016 3740; www.savills.com/abroad).



The cutting-edge Zil Payson resort has ‘HQs’ with swimming-pool ceilings. From £1.9m (020-7629 8171; www.knightfrank.co.uk)